CHAPTER FIVE

# Monsters and the Monstrous: Ancient Expressions of Cultural Anxieties

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Many of the most recognizable monsters in Western culture, such as Medusa, Cerberus, and the Cyclopes, started to appear in literature and art nearly three thousand years ago. Other, more generic types of monstrous or uncanny entities, such as dragons and ghosts, are even older and appear in art and literature across the globe. This chapter covers such creatures in the earliest folk and fairy tales of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean areas, keeping in mind that much of our information comes from tales, or, in most cases, prototypes for tales, embedded within the larger context of Near Eastern and Greek myths. The chapter first considers what the concept of "monster" might have meant for people in those geographical regions thousands of years ago. The chapter then examines what tales from antiquity survive that incorporated monsters, what kinds of monster predominate in these tales, and what the presence and roles of monsters in the tales might have meant.

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## CONCEPTIONS OF THE MONSTROUS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN

For many of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, the "monstrous" initially came into expression in art as a way to give visual form to ill-understood phenomena that they perceived as evil, such as natural disasters and diseases. Then "each region devised its own fearsome beings" whose appearances seem to have been influenced in part by the climate and fauna of the respective region (Porada 1987: 1; cf. Van Duzer 2012: 387–408). As early as the fifth and fourth millenia BCE in Mesopotamia, for example—a region that covered what now includes modern-day Iraq—people conceived of evil forces as hybrids incorporating the most dangerous features of two or more animals, most commonly the lion (teeth and claws), the eagle (beaks and talons), and the serpent (deadly poison). By the third millenium, such creatures started appearing in some of the earliest forms of story: narrative cylinder seal pictorial designs, which depicted monsters being "apprehended and punished," possibly reflecting "the general sense of security" under the kings of that period (Porada 1987: 1), such as Sargon and his successor Rimush, who reigned circa 2334–2284 and circa 2279–2270 BCE, respectively.[1]

For another example, during the same millenia and later, the animals that were most feared in Egypt and that therefore became "monstrous" in Egyptian art and, eventually, literature, were the most dangerous Nile Valley inhabitants: the hippopotamus, the crocodile, and various serpents—particularly the large and highly venomous cobra (Porada 1987: 2).[2] A tale from the New Kingdom period (sixteenth to eleventh centuries BCE) titled "The Doomed Prince" demonstrates such concerns: It is prophesized that the newborn son of a king will eventually die "through the crocodile, or the snake, or the dog."[3] The story, only part of which survives intact, appears headed for a happy ending as the prince's wife proves instrumental in helping him avoid the dangers. The tale falls under ATU 934 ("Tales of the Predestined Death") and specifically ATU 934D ("Outwitting Fate"). But one well-known Middle Kingdom story presents a different aspect of the serpent, imbuing it with a numinous quality. In "The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor" (*c.* twentieth to eighteenth centuries BCE) a man tells the story of how, having survived a shipwreck, he washed up alone on the shore of an island inhabited by a huge snake: "He was of thirty cubits; his beard was over two cubits long. His body was overlaid with gold; his eyebrows were of real lapis lazuli" (Lichtheim 2019: 262). But the snake indicated that he would not harm the sailor, so long as the latter told the truth. The man did so. The snake then prophesized that after four months a ship would arrive at the island and take the man home, but also said that the island, rich in natural resources, would no longer be there if or when the man returned. All transpired as the serpent foretold.[4]

Elsewhere bordering the Mediterranean, serpentine creatures predominated as the prevailing monsters both at sea and on land, perhaps because, as among the ancient Greeks for example, snakebites were perceived as particularly noxious; if the bites were not fatal (as in the case of Eurydice) they were certainly nauseating (as in the case of Philoctetes).[5] Although many serpents of ancient Mediterranean folktale posed serious threats to human existence, others were threatening only in their capacity as guardians of areas into which humans were forbidden to tread, as implied in the Egyptian story of the shipwrecked sailor and exemplified in ancient Greek stories such as Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece guarded by a dragon (ATU 513A), or Heracles' eleventh Labor, which required him to fetch the Golden Apples of the Hesperides from a tree guarded by the hundred-headed serpent Ladon.[6]

An astonishing number of monsters in early Greek myth and folktale, if not entirely serpentine, retained an extraordinary number of ophidian characteristics, such as multiple snaky heads or limbs. According to some ancient authors, even Cerberus, the multiheaded hound that guarded the entrance to Hades, sported a serpent's tail and a mane of snake-heads,[7] as also depicted frequently in Greek vase painting (Figure 5.1).

FIGURE 5.1 Cerberus with a snaky mane, being led on a leash by Heracles. Water-jug from Caere in Etruria, Italy, by the Eagle Painter, *c.* 525 BCE. Public domain.

Other monstrous creatures in Greek and Roman tales included familiar animals with exaggerated or unusual characteristics such as the Nemean Lion, whose hide was impervious to weapons; hybrids such as the Theban Sphinx and Cretan Minotaur; and man-eating giants, such as the Cyclops Polyphemus and the Laestrygones. Much about classical monsters was in keeping with earlier Near Eastern conceptions: their physical monstrosity often included hybridity and extraordinary size, while their behavioral monstrosity exhibited itself through excessively violent behavior that posed a threat to humans and human control over the environment.

In general, as many scholars of monster theory have observed, monsters tend to be culturally determined.[8] Each culture has its own anxieties and fears, its own definitions of what is "normal" and acceptable, while even within cultures people have different viewpoints about what constitutes "the monstrous." So, as Liz Gloyn points out, rather than being able to settle on a shared definition of "monster," creating a consensus about the concept, whether for classical or modern monsters, "would be far from straightforward" (2020: 3). In the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, at least, monsters embodied a variety of fears: the potential of chaos to overcome order; the potential victory of nature against encroaching human civilization, and of irrationality over reason; and even of the little-understood nature of the female in contrast with the male. These ancient stories repeatedly present monsters being conquered by gods and men—the perceived forces of order, civilization, reason, and patriarchy inevitably prevailed in ancient thought (Felton 2012: 103).

A partial clue to the ancient conception of "monster" comes through the language they used to signify such beings. For example, the Greek term *teras* referred to both portents from the gods and, in a more concrete sense, a physical monstrosity, something deformed; hence our modern term "teratology," which refers not only to mythologies about marvelous, unusual, and inhuman physical creatures but also to the scientific study of congenital abnormalities. The English word "monster" itself comes from the Latin *monstrum*, etymologically linked both with *monere* ("to warn") and *monstrare* ("to show"); a *monstrum*, to the Romans, originally denoted any manifestation of divine will "that breaches the natural order, provoking awe or at least shock," and eventually came to be the closest thing to a regular Latin term for any physically anomalous being.[9]

So, for the purposes of this chapter, "monster" refers to the sorts of creature discussed above: anomalous physical beings, often huge and/or hybrid, whose main purposes in the stories are to act as disruptive agents. At a minimum, they prove unsettling in their unexpectedness; at a maximum, they pose threats to humans and their attempts to settle into and impose order on the natural world. This perspective also accommodates such creatures as Pegasus, the winged horse born from the neck of the beheaded Gorgon Medusa: this hybrid horse was an anomalous but ultimately benevolent creature harnessed by the hero

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Bellerophon in his fight against the Chimaera (Figure 5.2), itself a grotesque, destructive, fire-breathing hybrid with the body and head of a lion, but with an additional head—that of a goat—rising from its back, and a serpent for a tail, including the serpent's head, making the creature tricephalic (see also Ogden 2013a: 75–81).

The same considerations also allow us to include under the rubric of "monster" such creatures as centaurs and satyrs, the latter of whose hybrid human-animal mixture varied across Greek and Roman culture from having a horse's ears and tail (the former) to having a goat's ears, tail, legs, and even horns (the latter), but whose "monstrous" behavior was limited to humanlike drunkenness and unsuccessful attempts to seduce nymphs or the occasional human female.[10] And, over time, satyrs were portrayed less as ribald and more as a type of nature-spirit that guarded the woodland. The shifting and relative cultural conceptions of what was anomalous and therefore monstrous are neatly reflected in one of Aesop's fables, "The Satyr and the Traveler" (G 368, P 35; ATU 1342)[11]:

FIGURE 5.2 The Chimaera of Arezzo. Etruscan bronze statue, *c.* 400 BCE. Public domain.

> When rough winter set in with thick frost, and every field stiffened under the hard ice, a traveler found himself stuck in a dense fog. The path was no longer visible, preventing him from continuing. The story goes that a satyr, one of the guardians of the forest, took pity on the man and offered to shelter him in his cave. The satyr, as a native of the wild countryside, was straightaway both amazed and greatly afraid upon observing the immense power of the man. For first, in order to restore some vitality to his freezing limbs, the man thawed his hands by blowing hot air onto them. After the cold had dissipated, he began to enjoy the generous hospitality of his host; the satyr, eager to show off country life,[12] had set out the best of what the forest had to give, and offered a bowl filled with hot Lyaean wine, so that its warmth would spread through the man's limbs and relieve the chill. But then the man cringed at touching the hot bowl with his lips and blew again—with a cool breath! At this, his host, utterly terrified, was dumbstruck at the double portent (*monstro*), and, driving the man out into the woods, ordered him to go far, far away. "I do not want anyone ever to come into my cave again," said the satyr, "who breathes two different ways from the same mouth!"

This anecdote provides a metaphorical attack against lies and duplicity (Adrados 1999–2003: 3:50), ironically pointing out *man's* unreliable, deceptive dual nature rather than overtly referencing the "monstrous" dual nature of the hybrid satyr, who instead appears as a perfectly normal representative of nature. The satyr, rather than the human, exhibits the majority of emotional reactions[13]: he pities (*miseratus*) the lost traveler, but then feels awe (*miratur*) and extreme fear (*pavet*, *perterritus*) and is stunned (*obstipuit*) at what he perceives as the highly unnatural and therefore monstrous ability demontrated by his guest. That is, the satyr demonstrates the emotions typically associated with human reactions to monsters.[14]

The fable about the satyr and the traveler highlights another relative aspect of the monstrous in folktale (and in general). Whereas in that story the traveler, implied as coming from a more urban area than his rustic host, was himself viewed as the monstrous element in the story, non-human monstrous creatures in Greek and Roman stories almost invariably dwelled outside of settled, urban areas, instead inhabiting mountains, rocks, caves, cliffs, and other natural, often liminal places largely untouched by human settlement. The farther from major urban centers people went, the more likely they were to encounter the monstrous, and the edges of known civilization were particularly rife with strange, threatening creatures (see Van Duzer 2012). The Sphinx, for example, lived on Mount Phikion outside of the city of Thebes; the Cyclops Polyphemus lived in a cave on an island; the snaky-haired Medusa and her Gorgon sisters traditionally were said to live on a rocky island in the Mediterranean. Similarly, bodies of water including lakes, marshes, and the often-hostile sea held many

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monsters (Boardman 1987). As Jan Bremmer observed, such locations are not surprising since wilderness is where "unordered" things such as monsters belong (1997: 3).[15]

Moreover, the ancient Greeks regularly identified women with the wildness of nature, considering them irrational and emotionally overreactive, so it is probably not a coincidence that a very high proportion of monsters in ancient stories are female. Similarly, the serpent was strongly associated with the female, so it is probably not a coincidence that so many classical monsters are also serpentine.[16] Many Greek monsters are born of Earth herself and serve as metaphors for the struggle of man over nature. Moreover, Sue Blundell suggests that women's capacity for childbearing aligned them with natural forces beyond male control (1998: 17–19), and the fact that women sometimes also produced offspring with physical abnormalities only added to the perception of females as potentially terrifying and destructive. Creatures such as the Python, Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis, the Harpies, and many others all spoke to men's fear of women's destructive potential. Given that so many classical myths, legends, and folktales—overlapping rather than distinct categories of story—involve a male hero conquering a female monster, these stories would seem, at least to some extent, to fulfill a male fantasy of controlling what was natural and female.

Having examined several examples illustrating how and why the ancients designated various creatures as monstrous, we can now turn to additional tales from antiquity that incorporate monsters and what the presence and roles of monsters in the tales might have meant. The preponderance of serpentine monsters becomes particularly evident in the most ubiquitous type of monster-tale from antiquity: "The Dragon-Slayer."

## TAMING CHAOS: THE DRAGON-SLAYER

The story of Bellerophon referred to above is just one early variant on a very old, very widespread tale: "The Dragon-Slayer" (ATU 300), which, illustrating the broad presence of monstrous adversaries, comprises the main sort of monster-tale surviving from antiquity. Despite the tale type's title, the monster need not be a dragon; any monstrous creature pitted against a hero qualifies (Hansen 2002: 119). The tale also usually includes, among other significant motifs, the rescue of a maiden who has been intended as a sacrifice, as in the case of Perseus (see below). But as William Hansen points out, many of the ancient mythic combats between a god or hero and a dragon feature neither the sacrificial maiden nor other typical details of the tale type, and thus bear only the most general resemblance to the international folktale (2002: 121–22). For example, Bellerophon's marriage to an eligible princess was unrelated to his facing the Chimera. Nevertheless, because many of these early myths seem to constitute prototypes of the later, more specific tale type in addition to providing thematic

context for it, they are worth considering along with the ancient stories that adhere more closely to the details of the traditional tale.

In a number of "dragon-slayer" stories from antiquity, the monster is not necessarily serpentine, though the hero may win a princess; examples include Theseus's killing the Minotaur and absconding with Ariadne, and Oedipus's killing the Sphinx and marrying Queen Jocasta (though these certainly do not have fairy-tale endings—Theseus abandons Ariadne, and Jocasta happens to be Oedipus's mother). But the vast majority of hero stories involve what are essentially dragons. Why do serpentine monsters appear so frequently as the principal antagonists in early myths? Daniel Ogden suggests that snake-based monsters make particularly popular adversaries for heroes because snakes have consistently been "the most dreaded and hated animal," citing the snake's form of "chemical warfare" and "huge, devouring mouth," while "being swallowed and eaten" is a basic anxiety of every living being in the food chain (2013a: 5).[17] Snakes were also perceived as untrustworthy.[18] Add to this the snake's association with the female (also considered untrustworthy), as discussed above, and this tale type's multivalent functions within the larger stories of Greek myth become apparent.

Many Near Eastern religions and social systems rested on an allegorical origin myth of a man battling a monster. In these cases, a young warrior-god who represents harmony, order, and often nationhood goes forth to battle a "chaos-monster" that threatens the cosmic order. In the aftermath of such apocalyptic confrontations, civilizations emerge, prosper, and flourish, and humanity takes its rightful place as master of the earth. Such monster myths proclaim our ownership over the world and justify the present order (Gilmore 2003: 28–9). So, for example, in Sumerian mythology dating to the third millenium BCE, the god Ninurta defeats a seven-headed serpent (among other monsters). In the Babylonian creation epic *Enûma Eliš* (second millenium BCE) the warrior-god Marduk conquers the dragon-like Tiamat, the embodiment of primeval chaos who also happens to be his mother.[19]

The earliest prototype of "The Dragon-Slayer" in classical literature, heavily influenced by the Near Eastern stories above, appears in the *Theogony* of the poet-farmer Hesiod (eighth century BCE). The *Theogony* (literally, "Origin of the Gods") presents an early Greek creation myth describing not only the physical origins and organization of the cosmos but also how life came into being. The first entities, which appear out of nothingness and are mostly amorphous, abstractions of concepts such as "void" and "doom," begin a torturous, chaotic, largely experimental process of reproduction that results in various monstrous creatures, many of which become the most well-known monsters of Greek myth, such as the Cyclopes and Cerberus. Hesiod aims to explain how Zeus became head of the Greek pantheon, so the *Theogony* presents a succession myth, in this case a cosmic struggle toward order that comes about in the third generation of entities, with Zeus and his divine siblings. Zeus's main obstacle,

brought forth by Gaia as a "final attempt to circumvent undisputed male rule of the universe" (Harris and Platzner 2004: 83) and as a test of whether Zeus was fit to rule the cosmos, was the monster Typhoeus, representing the old, female, chthonic order. The most fearsome creature in the *Theogony*, Typhoeus appears as an embodiment of violent nature out of control:

> From its shoulders sprouted a hundred heads of snaky, dreadful dragons flickering sooty tongues; and under its brows, from its eyes flames flashed, and fire burned from all its glaring heads.
>
> (Hes., *Theog*. 824–28)

Add to this the unearthly shrieking Hesiod describes a few lines later (*Theog*. 830–35) and Typhoeus presents an eerie, otherworldly, horrific opponent (see also Ogden 2013a: 19–38). Despite Typhoeus's hurling all the forces of nature at him— earthquakes, fire, hurricanes, tidal waves—Zeus defeats the monster in an explosive epic battle, proving himself a worthy cosmic ruler (Figure 5.3). With reference to one specific aspect of "The Dragon-Slayer" tale type, it is worth noting that Zeus had special weapons, as the hero figures in this tale often do: his thunderbolts, crafted especially for him by the first generation of Cyclopes. Moreover, his defeat of Typhoeus allowed him to become king of the cosmos, upon which he began mating with a number of goddesses to procreate and thereby populate the cosmos, ultimately marrying his sister-goddess Hera.

FIGURE 5.3 Zeus battling a serpent-legged Typhoeus. Water jug from Chalcis, Greece, *c*. 540–530 BCE. Public domain.

The dragon-slayer pattern set by Zeus and Typhoeus in the creation of the Greek mythological cosmos carried down both into stories of other Greek gods and into later mythological generations of men in which heroes inevitably had to fight monsters (serpentine or otherwise) in a reenactment of the battle for order in the cosmos—the younger, male generation trying to overcome the elder female order; civilization and rationality trying to overcome savagery and emotion.[20] The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* tells how Zeus's son Apollo travels to Delphi in Greece to found his own sacred sanctuary only to find the place terrorized by a monstrous she-dragon, which he promptly slays.[21] In killing this giant serpent Apollo abolished the old, savage, chthonic order and brought reason and culture in its place. Similarly, the Greek hero Cadmus had to kill a dragon before founding a new city in Boeotia in central Greece. He first needed to make a sacrifice to the goddess Athena, and sent several men to bring water from a nearby spring for the ritual. But they did not return. Upon investigation, Cadmus discovered that a huge serpent, a guardian of the spring, had devoured his men. He killed the snake and founded the city of Cadmeia, which became Thebes (see also Ogden 2013a: 109–18). The killing of a dragon to found a settlement represents, for the Greeks, the advance of culture over nature.[22]

Cadmus was one of the first Greek (mortal) heroes. This earliest generation of heroes also included Bellerophon, Perseus, and Heracles (Hercules to the Romans), all of whom faced dragon-like opponents. Perseus, best known as the slayer of Medusa—one of three snaky-haired Gorgon sisters—traveled to the Gorgons' island lair to cut off her head, viewing her reflection in a shield to avoid looking at her petrifying gaze directly.[23] This early myth reflects the theme of the younger, patriarchal society replacing an older, pre-agricultural, matriarchal world as the Gorgons had come into existence in the earliest days of the cosmos, their snaky hair reflecting their chthonic origins. Perseus also encounters one of the first major sea serpents in Greek myth. After slaying Medusa he passes Ethiopia, where he sees the princess Andromeda chained to a rock, about to be sacrificed to Cetus ("whale," "sea monster"; Figure 5.4).[24] Perseus slays the creature with a sword (or sickle) provided by the god Hermes, and thus, wielding the emblem of a "civilized" or technologically advanced culture (capable of metalworking and agriculture), Perseus proves himself a worthy defender of society. His story also provides the earliest clear match for "The Dragon-Slayer" tale type, inasmuch as he rescues and marries Andromeda.[25]

The deeds of Cadmus, Perseus, and Bellerophon seem minor, however, when compared to those of Heracles, best known for his twelve Labors. Heracles was not merely physically stronger than any other hero of Greek myth; he experienced more hardships, more tortures, and faced more monstrous creatures than any of the others, and his opponents included many dragon-equivalents—starting in his infancy, when the goddess Hera, angry that her husband Zeus had fathered the hero by a mortal woman, sent two giant snakes to kill the child in his crib. But, already exhibiting prodigious strength, Heracles

FIGURE 5.4 Landscape with Perseus and Andromeda; sea monster at lower left. Roman wall painting from the Imperial Villa at Boscotrecase, Italy, late first century CE. Public domain.

strangled them both. This incident foreshadowed the monstrous battles to come. Heracles' Labors and many *parerga* ("side-adventures") included fighting the swamp-dwelling multiheaded she-serpent known as the Hydra, Ladon (mentioned above), snaky-maned Cerberus, and Scylla, along with opponents such as monstrous versions of common animals (e.g., the Nemean Lion, the Erymanthian Boar, the Stymphalian Birds; see ATU 1960, "The Great Animal") and the three-headed, six-armed giant Geryon.[26]

In between his Labors, Heracles participated in the hero Jason's quest to the kingdom of Colchis for the Golden Fleece. Though Heracles left the crew before they arrived in Colchis on the eastern edge of the Black Sea, the quest involved Jason's having to maneuver past a dragon guarding the Fleece. Depending on the myth's variant, the dragon is slain by Jason, by Medea, or merely put to sleep by

FIGURE 5.5 Jason in the dragon's mouth (?). Greek cup from Cerveteri in Etruria, Italy, painted by Douris, *c*. 480–470 BCE. Public domain.

Medea, allowing Jason to steal the Fleece (see Ogden 2013a: 125–33). Figure 5.5, usually identified as Jason in the dragon's mouth based on what is clearly a ram's skin hanging on the tree in the background (in addition to the presence of the hero's mentor Athena), illustrates a version of the story that has not survived in extant literature: the hero being either consumed or regurgitated. Since he holds a spear, this may be a variant of the tale type in which a hero kills a monster by fighting his way out from the inside, as discussed in the next section.

## IN THE BELLY OF THE MONSTER

Related to sea-monster tales, "Man Swallowed by Fish" (ATU 1889G) appears in at least two substantial stories from the ancient world (Hansen 2002: 261–4). The first is the biblical tale of the prophet Jonah (*c*. late fifth century BCE, but set back in the eighth century). The Lord commands Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, an ancient Assyrian city in Mesopotamia, and "proclaim judgment" on it, because of its people's wickedness (Jonah 1:3). But, like many called to the Lord's service,[27] Jonah is initially reluctant to carry out this duty and instead tries to flee across the sea. He boards a ship, but the Lord causes a storm that endangers the ship until the sailors, by casting lots, figure out that Jonah is the cause of their misfortune. He admits this and advises them to throw him overboard, which they do. Then "the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three nights" (2:1). In this case, the fish is not entirely a threat but a savior, rescuing Jonah from drowning, though at the same time Jonah is trapped inside the fish, where he reflects on his situation.[28] Consequently, repenting his disobedience, he prayed to God to deliver him from the fish, whereupon "the Lord commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land" (2:11). The fish survived; meanwhile, the chastened prophet obediently continued on to Nineveh. The biblical story, as is typical, provides no details of Jonah's ordeal other than the basic descriptor "huge" for the fish, leaving the reader to imagine anything from cramped quarters to a cavernous interior—though more likely the former, given Jonah's inward focus.

The story clearly has a moral of sorts ("don't disobey God") and a symbolic meaning: Jonah is "reborn" from a womb-like environment. This differs considerably from the second such story from antiquity, that in Lucian's *True Histories* (second century CE), an intentionally ironically titled satire of "marvelous adventures," including those found in Homer's *Odyssey* (i.e., "lying tales" or "tall tales"; cf. Hansen 2002: 15). In the *True Histories*, the narrator and his ship's crew find themselves in all sorts of strange situations. At one point their ship is swept all the way up to the Moon by a whirlwind. Eventually they make it back to Earth and continue their sea voyage but encounter a whale described in monstrous terms, especially regarding its size:

> We had been sailing in fair weather for only two days when, as the third day was dawning, suddenly we saw many diverse [sea] beasts and whales (*thēria kai kētē*). The largest of them all was over one hundred and fifty miles long! … His teeth themselves were over five feet high, sharp as stakes, and white like ivory. Suddenly he was upon us, and gulped us down, ship and all. We barely missed being crushed by his teeth! Luckily, our ship slipped between them and dropped down into the whale's interior. Once we were inside, at first it was so dark that we could see nothing. But later, when the whale opened his mouth, we saw a vast cavity, broad and high, large enough to fit a city of ten thousand. Lying across this broad expanse were fish of all sizes and many other creatures all smashed to pieces, ships' sails and anchors, human bones and cargo, and, in the middle of it all, land and hills.
>
> (Lucian, *True Histories* 1.30–31)

The monstrous whale's interior contains entire ecosystems: sea birds nesting in trees on the island's coast; a large forest; factions of fantastical, monstrous, hybrid sea creatures (such as Crab-claws and Mer-goats) engaged in territorial disputes; and even other humans—an old man and his son dwelling in a farmhouse they built after being swallowed themselves, and who, having been stranded in the whale for twenty-seven years, have been living off the vegetables, fruits, nuts, and grapevines growing from the soil inside the whale.[29]

Since Lucian's *True Histories* is a satire of, among other things, belief in otherworldy powers and incredible events, the shipwrecked narrator and his crew, unlike Jonah, do not pray to any gods for deliverance.[30] After living in the whale for nearly two years, the men decide to effect their own escape. They first try digging a tunnel through the whale's side, but after excavating for half a mile without getting anywhere they determine to kill the whale by setting the forest on fire. It takes over a week for the creature to die, and they have to prop its mouth open to avoid being trapped inside. Finally, they are able to drag their boat up and through the gaps in the whale's teeth, and find themselves back on the open ocean.[31]

In other stories from antiquity, rather than being swallowed by sea monsters, heroes intentionally climb into the creatures' mouths to kill them from the inside. Lycophron's *Alexandra* (early second century BCE), a poem about the heroes who fought at Troy, alludes to such a story: in this lesser-known version of Perseus's tale, the hero substitutes himself for Andromeda and plans to crawl down inside the monster and kill it by destroying its liver (Ogden 2013a: 169–70; cf. Hansen 2002: 263; Georgiadou and Larmour 1998: 156–57). More well known in antiquity was the story of Heracles' rescue of Hesione, princess of Troy. Her father Laomedon had incurred the wrath of the sea god Poseidon, who sent a sea monster (*kētos*) to the plain of Troy, where it killed anyone it came across. An oracle declared that Laomedon could save his city by putting his daughter out as food for the monster, so he chained her to a

sea cliff. But Heracles, who happened to be passing by, killed the sea monster, saving Hesione. In one version of the story, Heracles "entered the body of the sea monster through its mouth and destroyed its flanks."[32]

In addition to these tales of heroes ingested by sea monsters, at least one story from antiquity involves heroes intentionally allowing themselves to be swallowed by dragons. The first, recorded by the Greek travel-writer Pausanias (second century CE), tells how a dragon attacked the city of Thespiae in central Greece. When the townspeople appealed to Zeus for help, he instructed them to offer up a young man to the creature annually. One year, when a youth named Cleostratus was chosen by lot as the sacrifice, his lover Menestratus devised a trick to save him. Menestratus fashioned for himself a special bronze breastplace, attaching one fishhook, with its point turned outward and upward, to each of the breastplate's little segments. Donning this armor, he surrendered himself to the monstrous serpent in Cleostratus's place, certain that once he did so he would destroy himself but also the monster: if the dragon swallowed him, his breastplate would tear up the monster's insides (Pausanias 9.26.7–8). Thus, Thespiae was rid of its menace.[33]

Many stories of being devoured by a monstrous creature may represent a deep-seated fear of being consumed. The question is then, on a nonliteral level, (since the protagonists do not fear actual digestion) what sort of "consumption" we are dealing with. In Jonah's case, he is consumed by fear (of his role of prophet, of disobeying God). Lucian's story, on the other hand, is not so much symbolic as satiric. But the danger in these two cases comes from being trapped and feeling out of control of one's own fate. Moreover, these "descents" into the bellies of monsters, including those of Perseus, Heracles, and Menestratus, may relate to the concept of *katabasis* (journey downward), a term used to describe heroes' journeys to the underworld. Such journeys "are naturally associated with caves" in classical thought—several caves in ancient Greece and Italy were believed to be actual entrances to the underworld—and caves can also represent the imprisonment of the soul in the body, or being trapped in the material world, and generally being unable to "see the light" metaphorically (Georgiadou and Larmour 1998: 157–58). The end of Lucian's whale-episode possibly also alludes to Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus: the narrator and his men are trapped in a cave and ultimately use fire to escape, in both cases taking care not to become trapped inside, as discussed below (cf. Georgiadou and Larmour 1998: 160).

## TALES OF MAN-EATING GIANTS

For peoples of the ancient Mediterranean region, dragons and sea monsters reflected a number of cultural concerns, such as the conflict between nature and culture, wilderness and civilization. Ogden speculates that these serpentine

creatures reflect a fear of being consumed on a more primitive level, likely also reflecting a fear of death and the unknown. Given the nature of such fears, snake-like adversaries were hardly the only standout monsters of Greek myth. Also notable was the Cyclops Polyphemus, along with other man-eating giants such as the Laestrygones and Cacus, though the latter two are not included in any folktale type.[34]

Polyphemus, however, provides the prototype for "The Ogre Blinded" (ATU 1137). In this tale type, a traveler, often with his companions, arrives at the dwelling of a man-eating giant and, through circumstances that vary among the tales, destroys the giant's eyesight, thereby managing to escape its clutches (see Hansen 2002: 289). Polyphemus appears in Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus and his crew discover the home of the Cyclopes during their voyage home from the Trojan War. When Odysseus narrates the story, he describes the Cyclopes as a race with no laws, no organized society or hierarchical structure of any kind; worse, "they show no concern for each other" (*Od*. 9.115). The gigantic, one-eyed Cyclopes live in caves on mountaintops—the sort of monster-appropriate liminal/marginal setting described above—and Odysseus stresses their lack of the technology usually associated with advanced civilizations: they not only do not build ships but are even pre-agricultural.[35]

Although Odysseus occasionally remarks upon the size and strength of Polyphemus (whose cave they enter uninvited), it is the Cyclops' behavior rather than his physical appearance that terrifies the Greeks. The fact that Cyclopes were one-eyed giants would already have been familiar to Homer's audience from the account in Hesiod's *Theogony*: "They resembled the gods in all other respects but the single eye in the middle of their forehead. So they were called 'Cyclopes' because they had one round eye in the middle of their forehead" (*Theog.* 143–5).[36] Odysseus does not even mention the single eye until describing his plan to blind the Cyclops (*Od*. 9.332–33). Rather, of more concern to Odysseus is what he considers Polyphemus's utter disregard for the guest-host relationship. The Greeks held the concept of *xenia*, or "guest-friendship," in very high regard: when strangers arrived at your doorstep, far from their home, the custom was to provide food, shelter, and various gifts. The expectation of guests was that they would behave well and also present their hosts with gifts. Polyphemus, however, expresses his disdain for *xenia* and instead seizes several of Odysseus's men, smashes their brains out on the ground, and devours them, "wasting nothing: guts and flesh and marrow-filled bones—he gulped them all down" (9.292–93). Trapped in Polyphemus's cave, Odysseus comes up with a plan: they get the creature drunk, gouge out his eye, and escape the cave by hiding under his flock of sheep. The Cyclopes' lack of advanced technology is also apparent when Odysseus and his remaining crew sail away, as Polyphemus tears away the top of a huge mountain and hurls it at the departing ships, barely missing them.

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After their narrow escape from the Cyclops, Odysseus and his men encounter the Laestrygones. This tribe appears to be more advanced than the Cyclopes because they have a citadel, city, and organized society, ruled by a king. But they, too, are gigantic, "as tall as a mountain-top" (*Od.* 10.113), and when Odysseus's scouts are summoned to the king's presence he immediately eats one of them, causing a panicked exodus of the Greeks while the Laestrygones, hurling huge boulders from the cliffs, destroy all but one of Odysseus's ships. Like Polyphemus, the Laestrygones do not have the technology to produce advanced weapons.[37] And the presence of a social hierarchy does not guarantee what the Greek considered civilized behavior: the farther away one goes from Greece, the more barbaric and monstrous the races. After their unfortunate encounters with the Cyclops and the Laestrygones, Odysseus's crew use these episodes as warnings to Odysseus not to be too curious to explore, as when he wants to investigate Circe's island.

## MAN-EATING WITCHES

Enough witches and hybrid witch-like creatures—including serpentine ones!—appear in classical literature to warrant at least a brief mention in a discussion of monsters. Although not falling explicitly into any tale type, the story of Odysseus's encounter with the witch Circe bears some resemblance to the story of "Hansel and Gretel" (ATU 327A). Circe lives in a house deep in the woods on an island—again, a typically liminal habitat, isolated from the societies of men. When Odysseus and his remaining ship land there, he climbs a hill to scout the area and sees smoke rising up from a habitation "through the dense thickets and woods" (*Od.* 10.150).[38] He sends a band of men to investigate, and in a forest glen they find a house of polished stone and hear a female voice singing sweetly. Enticed by the sound, all but one of the men enter; they meet Circe, who offers them food and drink. But she has drugged the wine, and with her wand turns the men into swine and drives them into a stable. The man who waited outside runs to warn Odysseus who, with help from the god Hermes, threatens Circe and compels her to disenchant his men.

The story of Circe clearly has details in common with "Hansel and Gretel." Odysseus and his men are lost, having been blown off course by a storm; they are also running short on supplies and constantly need to replenish their food stores. Similarly, Hansel and Gretel have been cast out from their home because their father cannot afford to feed the family, and they become lost in the woods when birds eat Hansel's trail of breadcrumbs. They then follow a sweetly singing bird until they come to a house made of cake with windows of transparent sugar, and a seemingly friendly old woman greets them in and invites them in for a wonderful meal; this resembles Odysseus's men being drawn by Circe's song, taking heart at seeing what appears to be a civilized dwelling in the middle

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of nowhere, and being kindly received and generously fed. While Circe is not literally a man-eater, she clearly preys on men (her reasons are never made explicit). And just as Circe suddenly turns on Odysseus's men, so the witch abruptly turns on Hansel and Gretel, dragging the boy into the stable and imprisoning him there, with plans to fatten and eat him. Clever Gretel tricks the witch, trapping her in the oven and freeing Hansel; Odysseus "tricks" Circe by using a form of magic to block her spell.[39]

Graham Anderson suggests a different tale from antiquity as a potential "Hansel and Gretel" prototype (2020: 91–3). Told by the Greek author Philostratus (late second to mid-third century CE) in his hagiographical account of the sage Apollonius of Tyana, the story presents a creature referred to as both a *lamia* and an *empousa*, here indicating a female shape-shifting monster that takes on the form of a human woman to seduce men, fatten them up, and feast on them. Apollonius sees through the creature's disguise and saves the young man she was targeting, pointing out to him that her luxurious house, with all its fancy trappings and feasts, was an illusion (Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 4.25). The moral seems to be that only philosophical discipline can conquer the allure of worldly pleasure: as Anderson explains, this story contains the stereotyped motif of the disciple brought down to earth by his master, and ashamed of his worldly attachments—the typical philosopher's rebuke to a backsliding pupil, who has deluded himself into thinking that he can have a lasting relationship with a courtesan living beyond her means and on the lookout for gullible clients (Anderson 1986: 141). We can also note the similarity between this story and "The King and the Lamia" (ATU 411), in which a king falls in love with a girl who, unbeknown to him, is actually a snake-woman.

While the terms *lamia* and *empousa* were sometimes used interchangeably, the *lamia* in ancient Greek folklore, unlike the *empousa*, was frequently depicted as part serpent. Moreover, the term *lamia* was sometimes applied to witches.[40] In earlier stories, *lamiae* preyed on infants, but during the Roman Empire, the creatures changed in the literature from infant-killing spirits to sexual monsters that seduced young men into a false sense of security, only to devour them, as in Philostratus's story. A variant of this story is embedded in Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche (itself the earliest complete version of ATU 425) though there the (alleged) shape-shifting snake-creature is male (Felton 2013). Psyche's sisters, envious of her marriage to an unseen and unidentified but incredibly wealthy and godlike husband, conspire to ruin her relationship. They say that her unseen husband is really an immense serpent dripping deadly poison from its bloody jaws, and they claim that he is only pampering her with luxuries and feeding her rich meals to fatten her and her unborn child before devouring them both. She eventually sees for herself that this is not the case.

On the one hand, the Greeks and Romans did not generally perceive witches to be "monstrous" creatures on the level of a Typhoeus, Cyclops, or Medusa

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because most witch-characters in classical literature, apart from the demi-goddesses Circe and Medea, were human women who distorted their societal roles as wives and mothers by practicing magic. On the other hand, witches such as Medea, Canidia and her fellows (Sagana, Veia, Folia), and the especially notorious Erictho, killed men and children for various reasons, including the use of human body parts in magic spells.[41] Both witches and *lamiae* provided fodder for bedtime stories told to frighten children into behaving, as well as providing moral lessons for young men and women as to proper behavior. The descriptions of Roman witches as animalistic—howling like wolves, digging the earth with their fingers, rending flesh with their teeth—hearken back to the male/culture vs. female/nature dichotomy, aligning these "impious" women with the more traditional monsters of classical stories.

## WEREWOLVES AND GHOSTS

The monstrous quality of witches and similar entities such as *lamiae* relates, among other things, to their seductive, magical (e.g., shape-shifting), and in some cases man-eating tendencies. Similarly, werewolves and ghosts were creatures considered monstrous because of their supernatural qualities, though in relation to the gigantic, often-horrific monsters found in Hesiod and "The Dragon-Slayer" tales, werewolves and ghosts are described in less terrifying terms, posing little to no threat to entire populations and only rarely causing physical harm to humans. The Greeks and Romans seem to have conceived of werewolves principally as men who turned entirely into wolves rather than as hybrid wolf-men, while ghosts were often literally referred to as *monstra* both in the original sense of being portents (which they often were) and unnatural. Both creatures also inherently exhibited liminal qualities, werewolves being neither human nor wolf, and ghosts being neither alive nor dead (in the sense of having moved on to an afterlife).

Several stories about werewoves and ghosts have survived from the ancient world. The most famous werewolf story from antiquity appears in the Roman author Petronius's *Satyrica* (first century CE) in the context of stories being told around a dinner table.[42] Niceros, the narrator, describes the unusual event that occurred when he set out to visit his girlfriend at her country villa:

> My master was away at Capua to deal with something or other. This gave me the opportunity to convince one of the guests at the inn to accompany me on my journey at least as far as the fifth milestone. He was a soldier, brave as hell. We left around cock-crow; the moon was shining as brightly as if it were noon. We arrived at the cemetery,[43] and my companion headed for the tombstones to pee, while I hummed and counted the tombs. When I looked around at my friend, he had taken off all his clothes and placed them next to

> the road …. He urinated in a circle around his clothes, then suddenly turned into a wolf!

The wolf then howled and fled into the forest. Niceros continues,

> At first, I was so stunned I felt completely disoriented. Then I approached his clothes and tried to pick them up, but they had turned to stone. At that point I was a nervous wreck, drawing my sword and hacking at every shadow until I arrived at my sweetheart's villa. I walked in pale as a ghost, having nearly died of fright; sweat was streaming down my face, my eyes were wide with fear, and they were scarcely able to revive me. My Melissa, amazed that I had arrived so late, said, "If you'd gotten here just a bit earlier, you would at least have been able to help us! A wolf got onto the grounds and attacked the whole herd—it was like a slaughterhouse out there! But it didn't get the last laugh. As the wolf was fleeing, one of our servants pierced it through the neck with a spear."
>
> After I heard this, I couldn't get a wink of sleep. As soon as daylight came I ran home as quickly as I could. When I got to the spot where the clothes had been turned to stone, I found nothing but blood. When at last I arrived back at the inn, my soldier friend was lying in bed sick as a dog, and a doctor was tending to his neck. Then it dawned on me that the man was a shape-shifter (*versipellis*),[44] and after that I could no longer eat at the same table with him—not even if you had held a knife to my throat.
>
> (61.6–62.13)

Several details here become standard in later werewolf stories, including the presence of the full moon, a liminal time of day (dawn), the wound on the wolf showing up on the man, and the theme of culture (clothing) vs. nature (nakedness), the last of which demonstrates how the man in wolf form has become pure animal. Shedding the trappings of civilization and yielding to his ravenous, dangerous, primitive essence, the werewolf, like other monsters discussed in this chapter, reflects the ongoing tension not only between humankind and the natural world, but also between the contrasting aspects of man's inner self.

Some ancient Greek and Roman authors seem to have considered werewolves as related to ghosts, as in a story from the second century CE that tells of a ghost—more of a revenant, really, given that it had physical form and could hurt people—that was also depicted as wearing a wolfskin (Pausanias 6.6.7–11; see also Ogden 2002: 175). But the majority of ghosts in antiquity were true apparitions: insubstantial entities whose mere presence terrified the people who encountered them, but that could not directly cause people physical harm. Such is the case in the earliest complete haunted house story, found in Pliny the Younger's *Letters* (late first to early second century CE). It contains many familiar

motifs and serves as a prototype for the tale known as "The Youth Who Wanted to Learn What Fear Is" (ATU 326, and 326A "Soul Released from Torment"). The story starts with a description of the house and its ghost:

> In Athens there was a large and roomy house, but it had a bad reputation and an unhealthy air. Through the silence of the night you could hear the sound of metal clashing and, if you listened more closely, you could make out the clanking of chains, first from far off, then from close by. Soon there appeared a phantom, an old man, emaciated and filthy, with a long beard and unkempt hair. He wore shackles on his legs and chains on his wrists, shaking them as he walked. And so the inhabitants of this house spent many dreadful nights lying awake in fear; illness and eventually death overtook them through lack of sleep and their increasing dread, for even when the ghost was absent, the memory of the horrible apparition preyed on their minds, and their fear itself lasted longer than the cause of the fear. Eventually the house was deserted and condemned to solitude, left entirely to the ghost. But the house was advertised, in case someone unaware of the evil should wish to buy or rent it.

A philosopher named Athenodorus, visiting Athens, hears the story and decides to rent the house. He sends his servants to the back rooms and keeps a vigil, focusing on his studies:

> At first, as usual, there was only the night silence. Then came the sound of iron clashing, of chains clanking; yet Athenodorus did not raise his eyes or put down his stylus. Instead he concentrated his attention on his work. Then the din grew even louder; now it was at the threshold—now it was inside the room with him! Athenodorus turned, saw, and recognized the ghost. It was standing there, beckoning to him with its finger. Rather than answering the summons, he motioned with his hand that the ghost should wait a while, and turned back to his writing. The ghost continued rattling its chains right over the philosopher's head …. With no further delay, the philosopher picked up his lamp and followed the phantom. The specter walked very slowly, as if weighted down by the chains. Then it walked to the courtyard of the house and suddenly vanished, abandoning its comrade.
>
> Athenodorus marks the spot where the ghost disappeared, advises the local authorities to dig there. When they do, they find a skeleton entwined in chains. Once the bones are gathered and given a public burial, "the house was no longer troubled by spirits."
>
> (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 7.27.5–11)

Classical literature contains several other variants on haunted house stories (see Felton 1999), as well as other tale types related to ghosts. In one rhetorical

exercise attributed to the Roman educator and speech-writer Quintilian, a young man falls ill and dies. His ghost begins appearing to his mother in the evenings, staying and speaking with her until dawn to comfort her, until her husband puts a stop to the uncanny visits (pseudo-Quintilian, *Declamation* 10, *c*. first century CE). The story thus presents a variant on "The Child's Grave" (ATU 769; cf. Hansen 2002: 92–5). A fragmentary story from Phlegon of Tralles (second century CE) may comprise a variant of "Son of the Witch" (ATU 425B), with the gender roles reversed: here, we have the equivalent of a supernatural bride rather than bridegroom, as the ghost of a young woman named Philinnion returns (in solid bodily form, i.e., as a revenant) to her home, has sex with a male lodger there, and generally terrifies her parents and the townspeople with her unexpected presence (*Mirabilia* 1; cf. Hansen 2002: 394; 1980). Among other themes, such stories reflect our common anxieties about death and the afterlife, and express the horror and grief we feel upon losing beloved family members.

## CONCLUSION

Medusa, Cerberus, Cyclopes, Harpies, the Minotaur, and more—classical antiquity has given us many familiar, specific monsters that remain nearly as well known today as they did over two thousand years ago. In ancient folktale such monsters often filled the role of antagonist, to be fought and conquered by heroes such as Perseus, Heracles, Odysseus, and Theseus in a triumph of civilized man over irrational nature. This chapter opened with a discussion of how monsters tend to reflect various cultural anxieties; different monsters across various time periods and a multitude of settings—whether ancient or modern—can represent mutifaceted and shifting societal concerns. But taken all together, the monsters of myth, legend, and folktale function to reflect our fears and hopes about the mysteries of the natural world, our place in it, and our ability to control or adapt to our environment. A vastly destructive entity such as Typhoeus may represent the chaos of a disordered world needing structure; dangerous, creatures such as Medusa, Scylla, and Charybdis may function as stand-ins for fear of the female; moreover, inasmuch as they devour humans, as do various other sea monsters as well as giants, Scylla and Charybdis along with these other creatures can represent literal and metaphorical fear of being consumed; werewolves may reflect humans' fear of the animal and irrational aspects of our own nature; ghosts may speak to our fear of death and hope for an afterlife: all of these creatures and their kin express these and innumerable other anxieties about the nature of the universe and our existence within it. Monsters, as an attempt to express what we struggle against and strive to suppress and conquer, compel us to look inward, to face our fears, and to meditate upon what it means to be human.

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